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JAR-BURIAL CUSTOMS AND THE QUESTION OF INFANT SACRIFICE IN PALESTINE

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Did the Israelites offer up human sacrifices, especially of children? Students of this problem have awaited anxiously the results of the excavation work in Palestine because it was hoped that therefrom some knowledge would be gained of the religious practices of the people who were dispossessed of their land by these Hebrew conquerors. If the Canaanites kindled upon their altars "the sacrificial fire" or by any other means offered their gods a human sacrifice, then it was argued that a strong presumption would be created that early representative Hebrews such as Abraham and Jephthah reveal by their acts the prevalence of the practice among their own people. From this standpoint then, as well as from the scientific, the question of present interest is: Did the Canaanites offer up human sacrifices to their gods?

An unqualified affirmative answer has been received from Mr. Macalister, director of the British work at Gezer, based on his interpretation of the unique find made "in the earth underlying the temple area" of that ancient city. This "cemetery of infants deposited in large jars" when carefully explored produced such positive evidence that the conclusion was reported at once: "that we have here to deal with infant sacrifices is, I think, so self-evident that it may be assumed without argument." This opinion has not since been changed but has been further affirmed by the other Palestinian excavators, Professor D. E. Sellin and Dr. Schumacher, and also by the distinguished Father Vincent of Jerusalem, author of "*Canaan d'après l'exploration récente.*"

The description of the discovery as given by Mr. Macalister may be summarized as follows: In the earth underneath the temple area were found a number of large jars, each of which contained, besides the infilling earth, the bones of either a young infant or a child up to

six years of age; the bodies had not been mutilated; they had been deposited in the jar usually head downward; the jars were full of earth which there was reason for believing had been put in at the time of burial; in four cases the bones showed some traces of fire; the usual food and liquid vessels accompanied each burial.

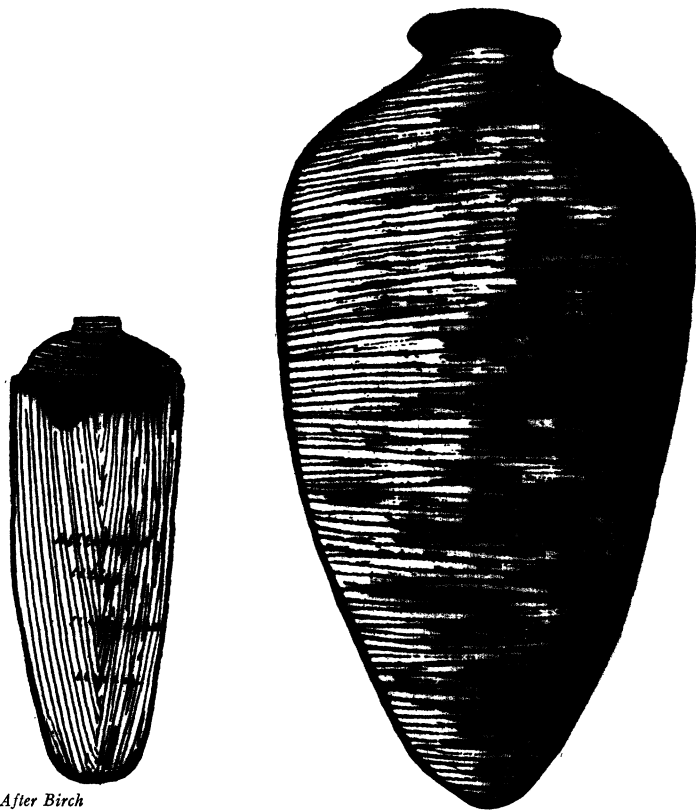
These observations, strengthened by the opinion of Robertson Smith that in human sacrifice "effusion of blood was normally avoided," immediately produced the conviction that these infants had been "suffocated—perhaps smothered in the earth with which the jars were filled," and therefore the Canaanites followed the practice of sacrificing their first-born children to their gods.

The attributing of this inhuman practice to these early settlers in Canaan does not however seem to rest on sufficient grounds to be decisive. Three serious objections to the evidence produced and to the interpretation in general may be raised; and further we believe another interpretation or theory may be proposed which will better explain all the facts.

First: The evidence as read from the discovery itself and presented by Mr. Macalister is too indefinite and illogical to carry conviction. What evidence could be obtained from those "excessively delicate bones" that the *body* had suffered no mutilation? If it was only *usually* that the body had been deposited in the jar head downward, what about the cases where the position was reversed? Would the hypothesis of death by smothering suit all other positions as well? Was the position of the bones the same in the cases where these showed traces of fire? If so, was not then the method of introducing the body incidental? Is there among the Semites or among the peoples of the world an analogous example of a sacrificial death by means of smothering? Does the burial in the sacred place necessarily incline one to *expect* to find sacrificed victims? This can hardly be, because of the well-known custom of the Babylonians and Persians.

These difficulties are however increased when we seek the evidence that the earth was put in the jars at the time of burial and did not find its way there by accident. Most of the jars were not supplied with covers—a fact which immediately creates a difficulty for the theory; for if the smothering of the victim were the end sought, and the head was not always placed downward, we should expect that a

cover would be needed. Mr. Macalister himself was not certain on this point, for he reported "Whether the earth was put in at the time of burial or washed in afterward, I could not certainly decide from the indications afforded; there is reason, however, for believing that it was put in at the time of burial." This "reason for believing"



After Birch
AN EGYPTIAN IBIS
MUMMY POT

TYPE OF JAR USED FOR CHILD BURIAL
AT GEZER

came from the fact that at el-Hesi some buried jars had been found filled with sand, which sand was different from the earth in which the jars lay buried. From the likeness of the burials at these two places, then, there seemed to be sufficient ground for drawing the above conclusion.

But while the analogy fails to stand because at Gezer it was earth—

earth, too, like that in which the jars lay—and not sand which filled the jars, Mr. Macalister is also guilty of a *circulus in probando* argument. When the jars at el-Hesi were first explored there was nothing from the character of the contained bones to tell whether they were animal or human. Since, however, those found at Gezer were certainly human it was argued that those at el-Hesi were of infants too. Thus when a doubt was raised concerning the el-Hesi find it was decided by reference to Gezer; when now evidence is needed to settle a point at Gezer reference must be made to el-Hesi. The vital point at issue thus seems to need further confirmation.

Second: Even if the archaeological evidence be indecisive, still a *presupposition* in favor of this interpretation might be urged if there were unquestioned proof that the practice of child-sacrifice existed among the Semites in general or even among the Israelites. But on this point there is at present too much divergence of opinion to render available evidence. As far as is known the only cases where the practice prevailed are those of the Carthaginian Phoenicians and the Israelites during the short period of the time of Ahab, which appearances may doubtless be credited to the influence of the Baal cult.

Third: Mr. Macalister has not proved that these temple-area burials differ in any essential respects from other jar-burials in Palestine or elsewhere in the world. Without the knowledge of the latter the theory is unchecked at the very beginning, for what was found was not "infant sacrifice" but "bones of infants buried in jars."

The other thesis, then, which may be proposed is that these Gezer burials are but another case of jar-burials and nothing further is needed for their explanation than a knowledge of the latter. To maintain it a comprehensive study of jar-burial customs must be undertaken.

JAR-BURIAL CUSTOMS

The term jar will be taken as including all vessels such as the urn, bowl, saucer, pot, vase, pithos, amphora, and the like where there is a general resemblance and where the same burial principles obtain.

The countries from which evidence may be gathered include Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, Greece (including Troy, Crete, and Cyprus), Italy, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Great Britain, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, America, and Palestine.

In Egypt the indigenes, to use De Morgan's terminology, made use of both hemispherical, bowl-shaped urns and rectangular tubs, which they either crushed down over the doubled-up body or set upright in the earth after the body intact or in parts had been inserted. Good covers were provided when the upright position was chosen. No definite order was followed when the body was inserted into the urn. The size is not given, but some were large enough to cover a full-grown adult in a doubled-up posture. No orientation as to the position of the head was observed.

The later Egyptians embalmed their dead and in the special vessels called canopic jars found a convenient secondary sarcophagus



After Schumacher

JARS FROM THE SANCTUARY AT TEL-EL-MUTESELLIM CONTAINING THE BODIES OF CHILDREN

for the parts of the body removed in the embalming process. These jars with their contents were set in the tomb under or near the larger sarcophagus. Another use and a very extensive one was also found for the jar in the burial of such sacred animals as the ibis, cat, jackal, hawk, serpent, or rat. For these either the canopic variety was chosen or those of ordinary use. The suitability of the jar was also discovered for the safe burying-away of historical papyri. In the tomb of Rameses II such a find was made and in tombs on the western bank of the River at Thebes the Greek papyri of the Turin collection were discovered so provided for.

The pre-Semitic peoples in the valley of the Euphrates practiced cremation, but used the jar as the depository for the ashes or charred bones. The whole was then buried away in an "Aschengrab."

A variety of vessels were chosen, mention being made of the oblong tub, the pot, the bowl, the goblet, the urn, the cup, and the pithos-shaped one, i.e., a vessel long and egg-shaped, with a short, thick neck. These were quite small in size and were chosen from those in everyday use. The position of the jar when found was either upright or horizontal, and when the former was chosen an attempt was made to keep out the surrounding earth by means of a cover of broken pottery. This was, however, not always successful. The customary deposits of food and drink in jars were found near these burial urns and some articles of personal adornment were discovered mingled with the bones in the burial jar.

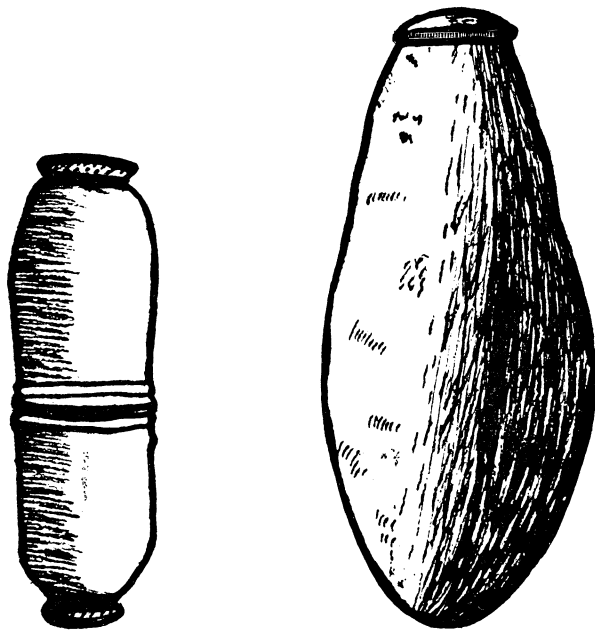
Mr. Koldewey, who conducted excavation work at Surghul and at el-Hibba, thought he could see *eine Art von Entwicklung* from the primitive, cup-shaped vessels to the beautiful, egg-shaped, goblet-like ones; also an evolution from the oblong, tub-shaped variety to the later anthropoidal sarcophagus, basing his conclusions on a study of the vessels and also on the depth at which each variety was found. But this seems untenable because the evidence shows that the vessels of ordinary use were those employed and hence they had not been chosen for burial purposes because of their *form*; and, further, Dr. Peters showed later that vessels of all these varieties were to be found in all strata, hence no argument could be based on the depth at which each was found.

When we come to the Semitic period cremation disappears, but the use of the jar for inhumation continues. The terminology used by Layard, Loftus, Peters, and others includes simple jars, urns, or bowls, double-urn, beet-shaped jar (like those found at Gezer), goblet-shaped, baby's bath-tub, and tub.

An ordinary specimen of the beet-shaped type would measure three feet in height by eleven to twelve inches across the mouth, while a bowl or urn was one foot six inches across the mouth and of the same depth. Such vessels appeared in all strata from that dated 2500 B.C. to the upper dated 500 B.C. The question as to how a good-sized child, to say nothing of an adult, found a resting-place within this small compass is answered by the excavators in such expressions as that "the remains had been thrust in" or "crammed in with effort" or "the body had been previously broken up" or "there

was no rule except to get the body in." Thus it was that not only single, i.e., one body to a jar, but also partial and plural burials were made.

In some cases an attempt at clothing the body had been made. No rule was observed in the placing of the remains in the jar. Infants



1
After Peters and Taylor

BURIAL JARS FROM NIPPUR AND MUGHEIR

1. A sarcophagus for a child made by placing two jars end to end and cementing them together with bitumen.

2. A specimen of the best-shaped bituminized jars used for burial at Nippur.

were inserted either head or feet first. One description given by Peters of a double urn-burial is especially interesting:

Half a meter lower than this . . . was another coffin consisting of two urns, the lower of which measured 0.95 m. in height and 0.75 m. in diameter at its largest point; and the smaller 0.60 m. and 0.55 m. . . . There were two skeletons in the larger urn, their heads at the bottom and their backbones along opposite sides.

There was no fixed rule for the providing of each vessel with a cover. Peters found some earth in some of the urns but judged that it had

fallen in through the absence or fault of the cover. The jars when laid away were placed in no special position. The place was either directly in the earth, in the ground floor beneath a house, or in one curious case in the mouth of a slipper coffin.

Concerning the location of the burial-ground, this was a point on which the Babylonians and Assyrians as well as the Persians were never in doubt. *It was always at some sacred place.* So strong a hold did this custom have that the Assyrians transported their dead to Babylonia to have them find their last resting-place in an especially historic and sacred spot. The nearer the temple, too, that one could be buried the greater was the satisfaction. A striking illustration of this is also given by Peters:

The best specimens of the beet-shaped coffins . . . were found on the temple hill (Nippur) near the surface. One found on the outer wall-line of the temple lay on its side. The mouthpiece had been broken off to admit of the insertion of the body of a child and then replaced. At another point on the same outer line of walls . . . was a similar jar lying on its side.

No different customs were observed with the jar-burials from those of the more developed coffin. The jar was in every case the "coffin" and not the "place" of burial. It was chosen from the vessels in everyday use. This excluded the looking for any religious or local ideas which might exert an influence on the form, but Peters thought he could perhaps see an evolution in the *size* of the vessel chosen. However he added, "To the last the old customs linger and we find in the latest strata bodies broken in pieces and thrust into narrow-necked jars." It may be added here as a fact of history that the anthropoidal form originated with the Egyptians and it was under this influence that the Greeks first introduced such coffins into Babylonia.

The jar was also used here for burying tablets, a silver plate, clay figures, armlets, as well as the usual food and drink offerings.

A principle of prime importance emerges from the study in this quarter, viz., *it was the jar which determined the form of the burial.* The fact that the body of an adult would be severed first at the thigh and then again at the neck in order to admit of its being stowed away in a jar three feet high; that in other cases the body was jammed or crammed in; that in others a small body would occupy space enough for two or three; in still others one body would be provided

for by distribution in two separate jars or two jars would be joined end to end and bituminized together to provide the proper amount of space; and when the neck of the jar was too small to afford entrance for the body it was broken off and then later replaced—all go to establish this point.

The Greeks, Trojans, Cretans, Cyprians and the early inhabitants of Italy all made use of the jar for burial purposes, when either cremation or inhumation was the practice followed. The Cretans add a new method of preparing the body for burial, viz., skeletonizing it. The body was first exposed till nothing but the bones remained, and these were then collected and buried in jars or earthenware sarcophagi. In the case of children, however, they buried them directly, after the body had been placed in a jar, as evidence from Palaikastro and elsewhere goes to show. No earth was purposely placed in the jar with the body. The other principles observed elsewhere prevail.

In connection with the study of the Grecian customs a statement made by Perrot and Chipiez must be corrected, viz., "Earthenware sarcophagi are invariably found *lying on their side* whether in Chaldaea or in any other quarter of the globe." This is disproven by finds made in Chaldaea, Crete, Germany, England, Palestine, and elsewhere.

Nowhere in the world according to our present knowledge has the jar been so extensively used as in Germany and in Austria-Hungary. In both countries complete urn-burial grounds have been unearthed and also special spots for the burial of children only. The urns were always provided with covers and were set upright either in the sand or earth or on a flat stone.

A phenomenon of special interest appears here in the use of fine, pure sand. This dry material in the cases of inhumation was first deposited in the freshly dug grave and then the urn was set in it. One burial hill of Roman date in Austria was found to consist of three distinct strata. The top one was a layer of deep, black earth extending to a depth of one German foot; then came a layer of yellow sand three to four feet deep, under which again was a layer of white sand. The urns in an upright position were found *only* in the yellow-sand layer. The idea seems plainly to have been to find a dry resting-place for the urns. This conclusion is strengthened by the further

facts that when the urns were not buried in either the sand or earth but in stone-built, chestlike rooms sand was first strewn over the bottom to a depth of two or three inches; and also when sand was wanting fine, dry, clay earth was used. Sometimes this sand or earth did find its way into the interior of the jar but it was never judged as having been purposely placed there except perhaps in the case where a man would throw a handful of earth on the dead as a means of purifying himself from any contamination he may have received from contact therewith.

The Fensterurn, the Gesichtsurn, and the Hausurn raise interesting questions because of their form, but otherwise with their use the regular customs were observed.

From the few facts known the tall jar figures most largely among the finds made in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia. No new light, however, comes for the subject in general.

The barrows of Great Britain when overturned showed the dependence of the early inhabitants on the jar as a burial vessel. The one fact of significance here is that the jar was deposited in the mound either upright or inverted, but never on the side.

In America, according to Dr. C. B. Moore, the jar has been used from aboriginal times down to the present day, but only in the southern parts of the country. Single, plural, and partial interments occur. The position of the urn when deposited varied considerably. Some were covered, others not. The uncovered ones lay on the side. No burial-field exclusively for urns has been found. With one probable exception the urns were all of the domestic variety.

[To be continued]